United Nations E/C.19/2004/L.2

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
12 May 2004

Original: English

Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Third session
New York, 10-21 May 2004

High-level panel and dialogue on indigenous women

Chairperson's summary

I. Introduction

1. The composition of the panel included Njuma Ekundanayo, Vice-Chair of the Permanent Forum with the portfolio on gender, Kyung-wha Kang, Chair of the Commission on the Status of Women, Noeli Pocaterra, Second Vice-President, National Assembly of Venezuela, and Stella Tamang, former Chairperson of the Indigenous Women's Caucus. The panel was chaired by the Chairperson of the Forum, Ole-Henrik Magga, who also made a statement. After the introductory statements by the panellists, the Permanent Forum heard the reports of the regional indigenous women's conferences held in preparation of the Forum's third session. A dialogue was held with Forum members and observers from Member States, United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, indigenous peoples' organizations and non-governmental organizations.

II. Contextualizing indigenous women's issues

2. Indigenous women, numbering more than 150 million throughout the world today, have been often invisible to international human rights, humanitarian and development institutions due to their marginalization and discrimination within their countries. However, the human rights, environmental and women's movements, supported by major international initiatives, are beginning to focus their attention on the human rights and special needs and concerns of indigenous women.

3. Despite their great cultural and regional diversity, indigenous women are facing similar challenges today, such as social dislocation due to political conflicts and migration, poverty and underdevelopment due to environmental degradation and lack of access to public resources, and marginalization due to their cultural difference and minority status within States.

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4. While specific local contexts vary, broader unifying themes and concerns, rooted in the common experience of colonization, globalization and nationalism, have emerged. Unified in their struggle for cultural survival, indigenous women have now been placed on the agenda of the international community as one of the "emerging key issues", and they are responding by organizing themselves on the international, regional, national and local levels.

III. Challenges

5. While major anti-poverty campaigns have been launched by international agencies, the social and economic conditions for many indigenous communities in different parts of the world have worsened. Economic globalization can play a major role in the deterioration of the natural environment and subsistence-based food security, and has contributed to the out-migration of indigenous women to urban centres, where they are no longer under the protection of traditional law and become particularly vulnerable to forced labour, trafficking and prostitution.

6. In addition, widening regional conflicts, especially in Africa and Asia, have led to increasing militarization and gross human rights violations against indigenous women. These new disturbing trends exacerbate the pre-existing, chronic conditions of lack of adequate health care, education and sustainable forms of income generation faced by indigenous communities in many parts of the world. However, indigenous women's groups have begun to speak out against what they perceive to be a collusion between Governments and multinational enterprises. They feel that the ensuing global processes of economic liberalization, deregulation and privatization seriously endanger their already tenable livelihoods and long-term survival.

IV. Policy recommendations

7. As these global processes have serious negative implications for indigenous women at the national and local levels, laws, policies, budgets and programmes must be put in place at the international, regional/national, and local levels as well if they are to effectively address these problems. Some of the issues addressed by the panellists included:

(a) At the international level:

(i) Mainstreaming indigenous women's issues throughout the United Nations system is essential to design effective strategies and to increase the number of indigenous women in decision-making structures; ensuring that the Commission on the Status of Women, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, the Special Rapporteur on the human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples and other human rights mechanisms pay adequate attention to indigenous women;

(ii) Disaggregated data: in order to effectively tackle the cross-cutting issues faced by indigenous women, the problem of lack of disaggregated and relevant data must be addressed by United Nations agencies and programmes,

(iii) Enhancing cultural sensitivity and local participation, taking into account culture-specific factors in programme design and execution;

(iv) Increasing indigenous women's participation in decision-making and governance;

(v) Highlighting the issue of indigenous women's migration, including human rights violations, trafficking and forced labour, as well as their impact on the spread of the HIV/Aids pandemic;

(b) At the national level:

(i) The Forum recalls and reiterates:

a. Paragraph 18 of the Durban Declaration which requested States to adopt public policies and give impetus to programmes on behalf of and in concert with indigenous women and girls, with a view to promoting their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights; to putting an end to their situation of disadvantage for reasons of gender and ethnicity; to dealing with urgent problems affecting them in regard to education, their physical and mental health, economic life and in the matter of violence against them, including domestic violence; and to eliminating the situation of aggravated discrimination suffered by indigenous women and girls on multiple grounds of racism and gender discrimination;

b. Paragraph 50 of the Declaration, which urged States to incorporate a gender perspective in all programmes of action against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance and to consider the burden of such discrimination, which falls particularly on indigenous women, African women, Asian women, women of African descent, women of Asian descent, women migrants and women from other disadvantaged groups, ensuring their access to the resources of production on an equal footing with men, as a means of promoting their participation in the economic and productive development of their communities;

(ii) In response to the growing issues of domestic violence and violence against women and children in our communities, indigenous peoples are searching for our own solutions. Indigenous community organizations in many parts of the world have established programmes for men and boys to complement the work of women's organizations. Such programmes, viewed as good practices, include indigenous men's anti-violence projects; men's groups and corporations to address domestic violence; youth programmes for boys, which promote cultural education and values; peer-counselling programmes, information campaigns and training programmes. These good practices need to be publicized and promoted. Above all, they need to be resourced;

(iii) Ending all forms of discrimination based on gender, race/ethnicity, class and culture, and enforcing existing human rights conventions and committing themselves to protecting indigenous women from human rights abuses and violations;

(iv) Putting in place and enforcing laws pertaining to the protection of the environment and biodiversity;

(v) Protecting ancestral lands and natural resources from multinational commercial exploitation;

(vi) Protecting intangible property and cultural knowledge of indigenous women and ensuring their right to cultural and religious expression;

(vii) Ensuring indigenous women's access to culturally appropriate health care (and respect for their reproductive health rights), education, and training;

(viii) Making available financial support for women's enterprises, and to create sustainable job opportunities;

(c) At the community level:

(i) Increasing the participation of indigenous women in local power and decision-making structures;

(ii) Recognizing and enlisting the crucial support of indigenous men and boys in achieving gender equality;

(iii) Supporting indigenous grass-roots and outreach organizations;

(iv) Greater decentralization of administration and public-sector services in order to assure adequate access to these services;

(v) Recognition and protection of the instrumental social roles indigenous women play in their communities and their specialized traditional knowledge;

(vi) Recognizing that violence against women is perpetrated by men mainly towards women (that they know) and exploring how men can teach men to manage/control their anger/frustration; placing a greater focus on prevention targeted at the perpetrators of crime;

(vii) Designing communication strategies for the engagement of men and boys;

(viii) Addressing bullying in schools and workplaces, working on instilling respectful attitudes, especially to reduce harassment of girls/women and men perceived to be homosexual;

(ix) Ensuring that the common goals of the equality women, e.g., equal pay for equal work, positions in decision-making and supporting caregivers, are not marginalized since women are not yet equal in these and many other areas of civic and political life.